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IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
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                      FOR THE DISTRICT OF MARYLAND
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                            BALTIMORE DIVISION
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    UNITED STATES OF AMERICA,
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         Plaintiff,
                                      Criminal No. 1:23-cr-0056-JKB
 6
    VS.
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    BRANDON CLINT RUSSELL,
         Defendant.
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                          EXCERPT OF PROCEEDINGS
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                   EXCERPT OF DEFENSE CLOSING ARGUMENT
                   BEFORE THE HONORABLE JAMES K. BREDAR
11
                             FEBRUARY 3, 2025
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    APPEARANCES:
         ON BEHALF OF THE PLAINTIFF:
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           Ian J. Goldstein, Esquire
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         ON BEHALF OF THE DEFENDANT:
           Michael Aubin, Esquire
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           Joseph Baldwin, Esquire
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         ALSO PRESENT:
           Special Agent TerryAnn Burns, FBI
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           Special Agent Steve Thames, FBI
           Jonathan Gerstell, Law Clerk
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           Aurek Ranson, Law Clerk
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            (Computer-aided transcription of stenotype notes)
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                               Reported by:
                        Ronda J. Thomas, RMR, CRR
Federal Official Reporter
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                     101 W. Lombard Street, 4th Floor
                        Baltimore, Maryland 21201
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(2:55 p.m.)

MR. GOLDSTEIN: Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen.

On behalf of Mr. Russell, I would also like to thank you for the time and consideration that you've given this case. Your sacrifice over the past week plus has been critical to us being able to have this trial.

Shortly, you're going to be asked to go back into the jury room and do your most important task in this case, and that's to render a fair and lawful verdict based upon the evidence that's been presented to you in this case. A verdict not based upon your feelings, but based upon what you've seen and what you've heard as it relates to this alleged conspiracy. And you'll have to determine whether the government has reached their burden of proof beyond a reasonable doubt.

And I told you on opening statement that they would not, and I would submit to you now that they have not.

The overwhelming evidence in this case shows that Sarah Beth Clendaniel and an informant Christopher Jackson planned to carry out an attack on multiple power stations in the Greater Baltimore area. He was the driver, she was the shooter. Just the two of them carrying out a plan Sarah Clendaniel was going to carry out on her own, if you recall from the testimony she said that multiple times. She was going to do it on her own before coming into contact with Mr. Jackson.

Brandon Russell remained in Orlando, Florida, many miles

away and never intended to participate in this terrible attack.

So why are we here?

I would submit to you that we are here because the government wanted to get Brandon Russell, former leader of the Atomwaffen Division, public enemy number one.

According to Mr. Jackson, he crossed paths with Brandon Russell in an online chatroom where like-minded national socialists were talking about accelerationism and the destruction of critical infrastructure. Through his conversation with Brandon, he learned of a woman in Maryland, Sarah Clendaniel, who planned to attack the Baltimore power grid. It's what she was planning to do alone. It was what Brandon Russell had never planned to do or to participate in.

Special Agent Burns told you that she began her investigation of Sarah Clendaniel when the FBI became aware of a convicted felon who was trying to obtain a firearm. They searched her house. They developed their case against Sarah and they had her. But that was not enough for them.

They kept going back to Brandon to try to get him to implicate himself in this conspiracy because the government doesn't like him. He's an alleged leader of Atomwaffen Division. That was abandoned in 2013. But they don't like the things that he says. They don't like the things that he talks about. He's a target. And they felt when they made that connection to Brandon Russell that they struck gold.

And they sent Mr. Jackson back over and over again to pump Brandon Russell for information, trying to get him to implicate himself in this conspiracy, asking Brandon Russell about the substations.

And what did Mr. Russell tell Mr. Jackson on at least two occasions when he was asking specifics about what substation should be attacked? "Look at the map, Dude."

Mr. Jackson had the information already. He had the information that was available on openinframap.org, a website that is publicly available to anyone with a cell phone or a computer and an internet connection. He had the information already, but he wanted Brandon to do more, the FBI wanted Brandon to do more. But despite his best efforts, Mr. Jackson was unable to get Brandon Russell to do anything that would make him guilty of participating in this conspiracy between Mr. Jackson and Sarah Clendaniel acting as a tandem.

Remember what the government told you during opening statement, the conspiracy is the agreement, the agreement to participate in a criminal act. Here, to destroy energy facilities.

But Brandon Russell never agreed to do anything. He never went to Maryland. He didn't arm himself. He never planned to go to Baltimore.

Ladies and gentlemen, Brandon Russell was not a participant. He was not a co-conspirator. He was a

cheerleader. As terrible as that sounds that's what he was, and that is not illegal.

Judge Bredar will instruct you that you have to judge the case based upon the evidence and the law and that your feelings about Mr. Russell's beliefs and the awful things he says cannot play a part in your verdict. The fact that he circulated materials like "Make It Count," which the government is trying to insinuate Mr. Russell wrote, although there's absolutely no proof of that, and items like *Siege* that have nothing to do with this case. This evidence was introduced for the sole purpose of getting you to dislike Mr. Russell because, after all, it's much easier to convict a person if you don't like them.

But that's not what this is about. Brandon Russell is charged with a very specific crime. The government has to prove the elements of the crime beyond and to the exclusion of every reasonable doubt, and they have failed to do so.

This is not a popularity contest, ladies and gentlemen. If it were, we wouldn't be standing here right now. The only decision you have to make in this case is whether Brandon Russell agreed to participate with Sarah Clendaniel in the destruction of an energy facility. The overwhelming evidence shows that this simply was not the case.

Even the government's star witness, Mr. Jackson, when pressed on cross-examination, told you that Brandon never

agreed to participate in this attack, never. So why are we here? We're here because the government wanted to get Brandon and they saw their opportunity, and they tasked Mr. Jackson with making it happen. But it didn't happen.

Throughout the trial the government has tried to confuse you, to get you to look past the law and make a decision based upon your feelings. They've tried to imply that all of those saved text messages that we saw on Friday, that that somehow was an ongoing conversation with Brandon, until I objected and I pointed out these were items that Ms. Clendaniel saved on her phone. This was not a conversation. These items came from whoever she was talking to, Mr. Russell, Mr. Jackson, whoever else was in these chatrooms and wherever else she was communicating.

Let's say that person A wants to illegally grow marijuana plants for sale. Now, I know growing marijuana in Maryland is legal. I think you're allowed to grow two plants. But this person A, they want to grow more than they're allowed to. They want to sell large quantities of marijuana.

Now, person B thinks that's a very cool idea and cheers them on. Even goes to a website where you can purchase marijuana seeds and he sends a copy of that to person A. He sends instructions he finds online on the best way to grow the best marijuana possible, and he shares them.

Does that make person B a co-conspirator to illegally grow marijuana? Of course not. Person B had no intention of growing marijuana himself. No intent of undertaking the action. That makes him a cheerleader, not a co-conspirator. And this is the exact same logic you should use when examining the facts of this case.

Person B, just like Brandon Russell, is no more than a cheerleader and that does not make him a participant in a conspiracy to damage energy facilities.

Let's go back to opening statements last week and recall what I told you the evidence would show. I told you the evidence would show that Sarah Beth Clendaniel was a self-proclaimed socialist -- national socialist rather -- and she was under the misguided impression that she was dying and only had months to live. She had beliefs similar to Brandon Russell regarding the state of affairs in society today about accelerationism and the belief that there's a need for a reset of society. And I told you that Sarah decided that the best way for her to further her cause was to attack critical infrastructure and create this cascading failure of power. Something that would essentially cripple society. And I told you that this is something that she discussed with her then-boyfriend, Mr. Russell.

I also told you Brandon Russell was a national socialist and he shares the same beliefs. Not only does he hold those

beliefs, but he speaks about them openly with other like-minded individuals. You'll recall Dr. Perliger was the first individual to testify in this case. He testified about this issue, and what did he tell you? Not everyone who holds accelerationist's views acts on them. That is the government's own witness.

The person who wanted to act was Sarah Clendaniel because she thought she was dying and she thought that this would be one, great heroic act for her to undertake, something to be remembered by. As crazy as that sounds, that was her motivation.

And I told you that you would see lots of chat messages where both Brandon and Sarah and others were espousing these Neo-Nazi views to one another on line. I told you that these beliefs were repulsive to most and it would make you angry, but I asked you to set your personal feelings aside. I told you that the evidence would show that this conspiracy consisted of two individuals, Sarah Clendaniel and a person working for the government who we now know as Mr. Jackson, an individual the government paid tens of thousands of dollars for working for the FBI in an effort to trap Brandon Russell to make him a part of this conspiracy.

Sarah Clendaniel and Mr. Jackson planned to target and destroy five power substations throughout the Greater Baltimore area. That is the conspiracy that we're here about. Not

obtaining a firearm for a convicted felon, not mylar balloons, or any of the other irrelevant information the government concentrated on in their case.

Sarah and Mr. Jackson discussed this plot at length, talking about how and when they were going to do it. They, being Mr. Jackson and Ms. Clendaniel, Mr. Jackson would be the driver and Ms. Clendaniel would be the one with the rifle. And the plan was for the two of them to shoot out transponders which would disable the power grid and create chaos.

Mr. Jackson agreed to obtain or make a rifle and other items for Sarah and the two of them planned to carry out this attack together. Just the two of them. And that's exactly what the evidence has shown, ladies and gentlemen.

I told you that Brandon Russell, on the other hand, was never in Maryland, never planned to be in Maryland, never discussed traveling to Maryland to participate in this conspiracy. Throughout the entirety he was in Orlando, Florida, many miles away. He was not involved in the conspiracy. He talked, he discussed, but he was not a participant. He was not going to participate in this act. He was not to be involved.

Even Sarah Clendaniel said this during her conversation with Mr. Jackson who continually asked her what Raccoon thinks about this, what Raccoon told her. And what did Sarah Clendaniel say to Mr. Jackson? I try to keep him out of these

things. This was her plot. This was something she wanted to do before she died. And Mr. Jackson represented himself as someone who also wanted to do that, for whatever his reasons were.

The government has gone to great lengths to try and tie Brandon into this conspiracy because he is the one they really wanted. He's the one they were targeting. They went to great lengths to elicit information through Mr. Jackson about their failed attempt to draw him into this conspiracy.

As I told you, Brandon did provide information, however, every single bit of information that Brandon Russell supplied to Mr. Jackson or Ms. Clendaniel was publicly available information. All you have to do is go on the internet. Sharing public information is not illegal. It's actually constitutionally protected speech.

I told you that the government would spend an inordinate amount of time in trying this case to get you to dislike Mr. Russell in hopes that that would overcome the lack of evidence and that you would somehow be convinced that he was going to participate in this conspiracy.

I told you we don't put people in jail for answering questions, which could just as easily be answered by Google. We don't put people in jail for their beliefs. And we don't put people in jail for the things they say.

There is not a scintilla of evidence that Brandon Russell

was going to participate in this terrible act, just Sarah Clendaniel and Mr. Jackson, a team of two.

I told you that the evidence would show that the confidential human source, Mr. Jackson, pumped Mr. Russell for information and encouraged him to make incriminating statements because they wanted him to be a co-conspirator. Sure, they wanted to arrest Sarah, but the one they really disliked and the one they really wanted to target was Brandon Russell.

Despite their best efforts they were unable, Mr. Jackson was unable to persuade Mr. Russell to do anything to make himself a co-conspirator. He never agreed to participate, and he certainly never made any effort whatsoever to travel to Baltimore.

When they searched his house, they didn't find guns, they didn't find 950 rounds of ammunition because he wasn't going to participate. This was a setup from the very beginning.

Mr. Jackson went to great lengths to draw him in and encourage Ms. Clendaniel to do the same. He consistently tried to get Ms. Clendaniel to elicit information from Mr. Russell that he insisted he needed. He saw the connection between Sarah and Brandon, someone the government doesn't like, which I'm sure they made very clear to him in their briefings when they told him what to do and how to do it.

But this is something Sarah Clendaniel wanted to accomplish. Something she told Christopher Jackson she was

determined to do on her own and would have done on her own but for meeting him. Mr. Russell was never supposed to be involved.

When Jackson asked if Raccoon had given her a target, her response was "No, but I've got ones. I've researched." She also said, again, that she keeps him out of it, he's not a part of it.

And when she sent Mr. Jackson the five locations, she said to him, "Take a look and see if you can figure out what I want to do." Never did Sarah suggest that Brandon Russell was involved. Quite to the contrary. She showed Jackson the ring around Baltimore and told him that the attack on these five substations would permanently lay this city to waste. This was her last, final plan, the thing that she wanted to be remembered for.

At the end of the day Sarah Clendaniel was the person who conspired with the government's confidential source.

Now, you can't really conspire with the government's source. And Judge Bredar will read you an instruction. If you want to make a note of it, it's instruction 34A in the jury instructions that you'll be given. There's no such thing as a conspiracy with a government employee because they're not really agreeing to act.

So the government not only wanted Brandon Russell but they needed another person to actually make this a conspiracy at

all. You can't have a conspiracy between Brandon Russell and Christopher Jackson. You can't have a conspiracy between Sarah Clendaniel and Christopher Jackson, not under the law.

At the end of the day, they had the goods on Sarah and her plot and that should have been it. But the government realized that Sarah Clendaniel had a relationship with Brandon Russell and the government wanted to get him. They had him in his crosshairs and this, to them, was an opportunity.

So instead of simply arresting Sarah Clendaniel, they drew this entire scenario out in a failed attempt to try to implicate Brandon Russell. And that is why we're here today.

Despite their best efforts, the government has been unable to present any evidence to support their theory that

Mr. Russell somehow agreed to participate in this attack and that's because it simply didn't happen.

Now, when I sit down, the government's going to have an opportunity to come up and speak to you one last time. They get the last word. And I would submit to you that that's a very powerful advantage because I can't get up here and contest what they say.

So I would ask, when the government is up here during their final argument to you that you think to yourselves, what would Mr. Goldstein say? How would he respond if he had an opportunity to stand up here and address us one last time?

Ladies and gentlemen, if you do your job as jurors, if you

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    take your emotions and your personal feelings out of the
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    equation, your decision in this case is an easy one. Brandon
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    Russell never agreed to participate in the conspiracy, this
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    specific act that Sarah Clendaniel planned to undertake first
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    alone and then with the assistance of Christopher Jackson.
         Importantly, Judge Bredar will instruct you that the fact
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    that Brandon Russell discussed common interests with Sarah and
    with Mr. Jackson does not establish membership in a conspiracy.
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    People can talk about all of the bad things that they want to
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         It's not a conspiracy unless they agree to actually do it.
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    do.
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         The government has failed to meet their burden of proof,
    ladies and gentlemen, and regardless of what you think about
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    Brandon Russell, his ideas, and the things he reads and the
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    things he says, he was not a participant, he is not a
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    co-conspirator, and he is not guilty.
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         Thank you.
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         (End of excerpt.)
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Ronda J. Thomas, RMR, CRR - Federal Official Reporter

CERTIFICATE OF OFFICIAL REPORTER 1 2 3 4 I, Ronda J. Thomas, Registered Merit Reporter, Certified Realtime Reporter, in and for the United States District Court 5 for the District of Maryland, do hereby certify, pursuant to 28 6 U.S.C. § 753, that the foregoing is a true and correct 7 transcript of the stenographically-reported proceedings held in 8 the above-entitled matter and the transcript page format is in 9 conformance with the regulations of the Judicial Conference of 10 the United States. 11 12 Dated this 17th day of March 2025. 13 14 Ronda J. Thomas 15 Ronda J. Thomas, RMR, CRR 16 Federal Official Reporter 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25

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